

Review: ACT rocks with new Tom Stoppard play 'Rock 'n' Roll'

By Pat Craig

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Considerably more emotional and just as brainy as most Tom Stoppard plays, "Rock 'n' Roll" flies on the wings of Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones as a soundtrack for the 1968 revolution on Czechoslovakia.

The play, which opened its West Coast premiere Wednesday night at the American Conservatory Theater, is a complex and captivating 22-year tale set against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, which serves as the backdrop for a very human tale of romance and politics.

Audiences familiar with the Eastern European political situation between 1968-90 would probably get the most from Stoppard's story. But the tale is so well-spun and elegantly presented only a smattering of political knowledge and a thirst for human drama is really all that's necessary to enjoy the saga of Jan (Manoel Felciano), the rock-crazed young man who was born in Czechoslovakia and educated in England (not unlike Stoppard).

When the play opens, Jan is at the home of his friend and teacher, Max (Jack Willis) a long-time, hard-line Marxist, who is puzzled at Jan's eagerness to return to his home country just in time for the revolution. He is going, he explains "to save socialism" and check in on his mother.

He packs light, taking little other than his record collection, which is well-received by his homeland pals. We see the revolution being waged between the vinyl grooves of such classic records as those by the Stones, Pink Floyd, the Velvet Underground,

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Beach Boys and an iconic Czechoslovakian group, The Plastic People of the Universe (a real band that will be playing at San Francisco's Slims Oct. 9).

As Jan amps up the volume and faces questions of a government interrogator (Anthony Fusco), back at Cambridge, Max is dealing with a growing daughter Esme (Summer Serafin) and a poetry-loving wife, Eleanor (Rene Augesen) who is dying of cancer.

And in both places, the dialog crackles with political and emotional overtones as the different characters all face earth-shaking change on global and highly personal levels.

It is this wide-ranging conversation, so dazzlingly created by Stoppard and delivered in such a captivating manner by the ACT cast, that keeps the play rolling along and holding fast to your attention.

ACT artistic director Carey Perloff directs with a stylish attitude that plays well against the rock music soundtrack.

"Rock 'n' Roll" also has one of the most brilliant sets ever. When you enter the theater and look at the stage, you seem to be staring down from the roof of a tall apartment building with large windows on all four sides. At the back of the stage is a large white space, which turns out to be a video screen. But what is most fascinating about the Douglas W. Schmidt set is that the various pieces open up at different times to be a home in Cambridge, an apartment in Prague and a Prague street.

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THEATER REVIEW WHAT: American Conservatory Theatre Company presents Rock 'n' Roll, by Tom Stoppard

WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays, 1 and 7 p.m. Sundays

WHERE: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco

RUNNING TIME: 2 hours 45 minutes

TICKETS: \$20-\$82, 415-749-2228 or www.act-sf.org